

**Dialogue With My Daughter: Part I**  
**Cognitive Dissonance**  
**Institutional v. Individual Interests**  
**The Refiner's Fire**

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

A few people have contacted me and indicated that while what I write is interesting and useful, it is far too long and uses language that is too technical. They have accordingly encouraged me to try to follow the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle. Accordingly, I am experimenting with recording some of the conversations I have with my kids and am as a result finding a more accessible presentation style. Some of the same people who asked for easier to read versions of my material have indicated this approach works for them. So, here is another conversation summary. As is the case with all of my pieces of this sort, most of the content of this summary is drawn from actual conversations with my older daughters (ages 17 to 22). However, lots of extraneous material has been excluded and I have taken some creative license to "smooth" things out. The conversation setting is in my car on the way to drop a daughter off at work. The content summarized here represents a small fraction of what we talk about.

Daughter: Did you know that Lori is dating Matt? And he is cheating on her just like he did Mary. Some of Lori's friends told her about it, and she wouldn't believe them. But she called me last night, since I'm not involved. And I told her that I'm not aware of a single girl he has dated that he has not cheated on. But I think she is still going to date him.

Bob: Hmmm. Why would she do that?

D: She likes him so much that she can't believe he would cheat on her, regardless of what we tell her.

B: Are you aware of the term psychologists use to describe that behavior?

D: (eye roll). No Dad. But you're going to tell me, aren't you.

B: Yup. Its cognitive dissonance. We've talked about this before, haven't we?

D: Yes, but I can't remember how it works.

B: Its pretty simple. Our minds don't like conflicting ideas – dissonance. A "cognition" is an idea. So, if two ideas are in conflict, our mind tries to find a way to bring them into harmony. In Lori's case, which two ideas are in conflict?

D: She loves Matt, and believes that he loves her. But if he did, he wouldn't be sneaking around and dating other girls.

B: Right. And how has she resolved that conflict?

D: By ignoring what everyone says about Matt is doing. And I know what he will be telling her – "No, I was just hanging out with her ..." That is what he tells everyone. And, Lori will believe him and not believe anyone else, because she wants to have a future with him.

B: I think you are bang on. Have you heard about how different brain parts affect this process?

D: No. (No eye roll this time, because we are talking about something in which she is vitally interested.)

B: Well, some parts of the brain evolved much earlier than others. (She believes in evolutionary theory for the most part.) The parts of the brain closest to the brain stem, for example, are called the "reptilian core" of the brain because they closely resemble the brains of reptiles, which are the oldest animals now living in evolutionary terms. Because this part of the brain evolved so early, it deals with the most basic aspects of life – survival, reproduction etc. It is where the mechanisms that control fear, for example, reside. Scientists can study the brain by using MRIs and similar things to see which parts are active when we do certain things. The further one moves from the reptilian core of the brain out toward the "grey matter" that forms the brain's outside shell, the more complex the brain functions become. For example, our capacity for language and math is governed by parts of the cerebral cortex, which is what the "grey matter" around the outside is called.

What do you think happens when one idea that lights up the reptilian core of the brain is in conflict with another idea that lights up part of the cerebral cortex? In a cognitive dissonance contest, which idea will win?

D: Probably the idea from the reptilian core, since those things are more basic.

B: Bingo! The cerebral cortex can overcome the reptilian core, but it takes a lot of information and mental work to do that. The reptilian core is designed to deal with issues related to survival. If an ancient hunter heard a sound in the bushes that might be a tiger, he did not wait around to find out whether it was a tiger. The hunters who did that did not leave many kids because they died quickly. Our instinct – and the reptilian core is all about instinct – is to get away from whatever we fear.

So, what do you think is involved in Lori's case in terms of the reptilian core and the cerebral cortex?

D: Hmmm. How does love relate to the reptilian core?

B: I am not sure. But, since love relates to reproduction, my bet is that the reptilian core is involved. But how about this. How many girls do you know who are utterly confident that if they lose one boyfriend, they will find another just as good, or better.

D: (pause). None.

B: So, I would say that Lori is dealing with a lot of fear when she confronts the possibility of losing Matt. Would you agree?

D: Absolutely.

B: So, how much information do you think she will need to before she will be able to accept that he is a cheatin scum?

D: Huge amounts.

B: Think about the women we have heard about whose husbands have affairs, are alcoholics, or even beat them. Why don't they leave?

D: This is starting to make sense to me.

B: Now, think about this in terms of our recent issues respecting religious matters.

D: (Noticeably tenses. She has been down similar roads before, and does not like them.)

B: Why do members of some religions that we think are nuts not simply change their beliefs?

D: (Starts to relax.)

B: Remember the stuff in the news a while back about that Jehovah's Witness girl who refused blood transfusions, and died? Remember how her father left the JW church, and got a court order to force her to have the transfusions, and how that broke up his family? And then the mother, daughter and JW church officials went back to court and got the order overturned on the basis that even though the girl was underage (16), she was unusually mature and should be allowed to make her own decision. So, she declined the transfusions and died.

D: That was nutty.

B: Given what we just talked about, does that kind of thing make any more sense to you?

D: Yes. When a person has been raised within a belief system, they fear leaving it and sometimes can't see what is obvious to those outside the system - that some of their beliefs are nutty.

B: Why do you think this would be the case?

D: Hmmmm. I'm not sure. Maybe because it is all they know ...

B: That probably has a lot to do with it. And how about this. The evolutionary psychologists tell us that our instincts developed during a long period of time while we lived in hunter-gatherer groups. What would happen to a person in a hunter-gatherer group who broke rules that were so important that he was expelled from the group?

D: He would die.

B: Right. And, the psychologists tell us that our instincts were formed in that environment, and that even though we are not dependant on our dominant group in the same way now, we still have a similar fear of being expelled from the group. Instincts of this type change very slowly. And what happens when our fear systems in the reptilian core are ignited, as demonstrated by Lori?

D: We can't see what is obvious to everyone else.

B: Did you know that medical doctors are told that they should not diagnose or treat their own family members or close friends?

D: No.

B: Now that you know that, why do you think that is good advice, in light of what we have been talking about?

D: Hmm. I guess if they fear the consequence of their child being sick, they might not see the evidence that she is sick.

B: Right. And, how do you think they deal with this problem?

D: Maybe collect the evidence and then send it to another doctor?

B: Not even that. They send their kid to another doctor. They don't even trust themselves to collect the evidence necessary to diagnose.

D: Right. That makes sense.

B: So, if we acknowledge that our inability to think straight regarding things that are emotionally important to us, how should we deal with that?

D: (Silence.)

B: What did Lori do?

D: She came to me and others.

B: Was that a good idea?

D: Yes. But she did not take our advice.

B: But at least she tried to get outside of her own head. That was a step in the right direction. Perhaps if she knew more about cog dis she would have trusted you more. How do you think the doctor I just mentioned deals with advice from his colleague that his daughter has cancer?

D: He probably accepts it.

B: Right. Maybe he gets a second opinion, but he knows that the best advice, and hence the advice he should trust, will come from those who are expert in the relevant field and are not clouded by emotion. He knows that he should not accept his own judgment regarding this of that nature.

So, when dealing with religious issues, how should a person proceed? If you are looking at information that threatens your place in your group, the fear is going to be stifling because of the instinct related to staying in the group

that I mentioned a minute ago. The JW people we were talking about for example. How should they proceed?

D: Well, I suppose they should listen to the advice of people who understand their issues and are not affected by emotion. But that is awfully hard to do respecting religious issues. Who can be objective?

B: Fair point. No one will be perfectly objective. But some will be much more objective than others, right? How can Friend X be objective about Mormonism? He is a professional historian and told me a while ago that when he reads the most reputable history available respecting Mormonism it makes him physically ill, and he can't read it. But he still "knows" that Mormonism is true. How objective can we expect him to be? And what about that counselor you met with once? Remember that meeting I was in with you? Was that guy likely to be more, or less, objective than someone like Friend X, or me?

D: Much more. What about this JW stuff with blood transfusions. Where did that come from?

B: The same place a lot of Mormon ideas come from. The JWs started about 60 years after Mormonism did. One of their important theological ideas is that our spirits are physically part of our blood. Biblical passages, interpreted in certain ways, support this idea. So, if you accept that premise, it logically follows that blood transfusions would be a really bad thing - they would pollute your spirit. This is a classic example of the trouble that is created when things that are useful in metaphor are taken literally. So, this idea become central to JW theology. And medical knowledge at the time was so limited that the idea that blood transfusions were a bad thing did not seem as foolish as it does today. As medical knowledge advanced, it made the JW theology on this point look worse and worse. But the JWs were in a tight spot. If they admitted they were wrong on this point, it would undermine their entire authority structure. If their leaders were wrong on that point, what else might they be wrong respecting? So, they stick to their guns and insist that the price to be paid by avoiding blood transfusions (death in many cases) is worthwhile because it enables salvation after death. Mormonism is full of similar conflicts between theology and what we would now call common sense that arose in the same way - ideas that at one time seemed sensible and were accepted as having come from god are later proven to be probably false.

Remember that boy you told me about whose dad told him that all gays should be put on an island and burned alive, and the kid was gay? Same thing. Biology has provided evidence that shows it to be highly likely that

many gay people were created that way. However, many religions on the basis of a misunderstanding of biology think otherwise, and are highly resistant to the information coming out of the biological community. This produces Dads that say things like this to gay kids. No wonder the rate of suicide in the Mormon gay community is so high. Can you see fear, cognitive dissonance, and the distortion of the human ability to understand the evidence sitting in front of us at work here?

Or how about the way Mormon kids tend to get married right after the young men return from missions, even though there is a strong correlation between young marriages and divorce? Or the fact that Mormon girls still tend to rely on marriage instead of education for their long term support? We have talked about this stuff before, right?

D: Yes.

B: I recognize how tough this stuff is. This is a refiner's fire. Do you remember how that metaphor works.

D: No. Remind me.

B: The refiner's fire metaphor in the scriptures is drawn from the purification process used respecting metals. The impure metal is put into a fire. The impurities are called "dross". As a result of the refining process – the refiner's fire – they are either burned off, or float to the top and are skimmed off, leaving only the pure metal. The carat system in gold is a measure of purity. 24 carat gold is the more pure. It has been subjected to the hottest fire, or the longest purification process.

Going into the fire is never pleasant. But, there is no other way to separate the dross from the pure metal. That is what our family is going through. A fire is burning in our lives, and in many cases it is not welcome. I did not welcome it initially. But as it burned and I suffered, I gradually began to see dross that had been invisible to me. Once it was in view, I could choose to keep it, or get rid of it. Until I could see it, I did not have that choice. I became grateful for the refiner's fire because it gave me more choice – and so more freedom. The initial pain is a price I became willing to pay.

I hope that as time passes you will get into a position where you can see more of the dross, and make conscious choices. We all have to work through a lot of fear to be able to do that. And the only way to work through fear is to ingest massive amounts of information, which we tend to fear as well. This is as hard as things get. But I believe that it is worth it.

D: Love you Dad.

B: I love you too. Have fun at work!

D: (Gets out of the car and heads into work.)